

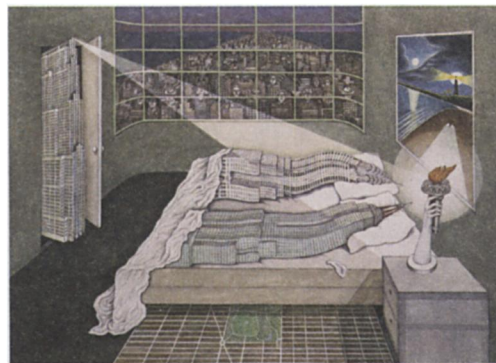
Flagrant Délit, *Après l'Amour* and *Freud Unlimited* all appear in *Delirious New York*, intervening in the text rather than simply illustrating it, erupting in moments of hallucinatory intensity that expand the radical collage effect of the book as a whole. But they are part of a much larger series of paintings of the secret life of buildings that already existed before the book was first published in 1978. Other paintings from the series have been published elsewhere, for example *The Ecstasy of Mrs Caligari* appeared on the cover of *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* in 1974. The Italian magazine *Casabella* reproduced *Après l'Amour* in 1975 and in 1977 published a diary featuring all of the series as well as work by Zoe Zenghelis and other OMA projects. To see Vriesendorp's work in this larger context is to see it in a different light – to see that whilst her images are central to the genesis of the OMA project, and *Delirious New York* in particular, they also have a life outside it. Her paintings are crystal-clear visions of desire and destruction. Some are apocalyptic in their depiction of an abandoned utopia of Manhattan in ruins. They create an imaginary world, or rather, in Vriesendorp's terms perhaps, they make a city – which means they are diverse and complex and experienced in multiple ways.

The paintings, drawings, collages and collections that she has made are driven by a powerful logic. This is not about an individual style (in fact, Vriesendorp prefers to work collaboratively) but about what the work feels like. Where looking outwards seems to be looking inwards and vice versa. The paintings offer visions of the weirdly mutating cityscapes of Manhattan, but also visions of the inside of mental constructions – like the inside of your head. The normal format of her paintings is to represent an interior and then to make apertures in the walls which are depictions either of windows or pictures. The rectangular frame of the painting becomes a container for a nest of Chinese boxes that are the pictures within the picture. Even when the *mise-en-scène* is not an interior, the basic structure still applies, as if a picture is always marking the intersection of inside and outside. Shut your eyes and you can see the lining.

It is of course predictable to find that there is a gap between what the paintings look like as reproductions and what they look like in the flesh. Anyhow, leaps of scale are built into them, in what Vriesendorp has called 'scale confusion'. Scale and its confusions are also endemic to architecture. It comes as no great surprise, either, to discover that her initial training was not in fine art or architec-

Fragrant Deli

Briony Fer



However familiar the image has become, it never loses its strangeness: the Empire State and the Chrysler buildings in bed together, limp with love, caught in the act by the Rockefeller Center. Manhattan's origins imagined as a family romance played out between skyscrapers, with the Rockefeller cast as victorious progeny in an Oedipal scene depicted in clinical detail.

Flagrant Délit was the painting that appeared on the original cover of Rem Koolhaas's *Delirious New York*. Together with the other paintings by Madelon Vriesendorp in that book, it has become iconic – the kind of image that you remember in hyper-detail without seeing, that seems etched on the inside rather than the outside of the eye. Yet few people have seen the actual paintings or know much about the artist. Until now, that is, with her paintings and objects and archive – a huge cabinet of curiosities – having been shown at the AA in an exhibition curated by Shumon Basar and Stephan Trüby.

body, in a vast terrain of desire. A postcard collection also multiplies across huge distances – the vast landscapes of the US are brought together, scaled down into a frame approximately three inches by five. Picture-making, according to the measure of perpetual mobility that is a postcard, is itself a sudden and involuntary contraction.

Madelon Vriesendorp's paintings are also rather like a collection of things – a deliberately incoherent composite rather than a composition of coherent elements. The titles are part of the collage too. *The Ecstasy of Mrs Caligari* came about shortly

after seeing Fritz Lang's film, with Liberty lying sprawled huge and helpless over

ture but in etching, which she studied at the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam, and that she began work as an illustrator. Her sensibility is in many ways that of a miniaturist. One of her earliest works is a postage stamp-sized etching that contains no less than 50 figures. Today her studio is crammed with hundreds, probably thousands, of tiny figures and objects collected together on every available surface. On top of a large plan-chest there is a vast cityscape made of small souvenirs – including, of course, innumerable Empire State buildings and other skyscrapers – divided into several zones, each of which is a concentration of buildings, figures and body parts, with one corner devoted to religion and war. It is like a diagram of a city and its viscera. The small objects, most of them cheap and made of plastic, are drawn from all over the world, many given to her by other people. On another table there is a Mickey Mouse zone with one specimen in red coral from China, small tokens of globalisation. It as if the geography of the world could shrink to this, but at the same time these tiny objects expand to mimic and contain all the myths and symbols of the world.

Some artists are collectors, others not. Vriesendorp's way of being an artist is first and foremost as a collector, and the greatest collection of all are her postcards trawled from across America since the 1970s. She has a couple of old suitcases full of these old postcards, all classified – or zoned – according to subject, one crazy subject after another. With a sleight of hand, what she calls the 'wish you were here' postcards become 'wish you weren't here' postcards – disasters, crocodiles, giant vegetable competitions and so on. The hand-coloured or badly printed postcards of rock formations, lurid in their strangeness, often rival Dalí's anamorphic projections in his own paranoid-critical method, which has clearly informed Vriesendorp's vision of landscape – where everything becomes a body or a potential

Madelon Vriesendorp, *Flagrant Délit* (version II), 1975
Centre Canadien d'Architecture (CCA), Montreal

Manhattan, engulfed in drapery that is also water, superimposed over the globe. And whilst you can often see in the paintings souvenirs of past art, such as little fragments of motifs that remind you of Bosch or Dalí, they are even closer to old postcards than they are to a history of painting. If Frank Stella once said that he wanted his painting to look as good as the colour of the paint in the can, then I can imagine Vriesendorp wanting to make a picture look as good as these old postcards, which have been doctored and collaged together and have a compelling impurity about them. The way Vriesendorp draws and uses bright clear watercolour invokes the graphic techniques of historic postcard images of famous Manhattan skyscrapers produced in the late 1920s and 1930s, when they were first built. Many of the images within images that she introduces into her paintings are of postcards in her collection – the underground caverns and gorges, for example, that decorate the wall of *Freud Unlimited*. A postcard is an image that is in circulation within a culture, part of a distribution of images. But postcards are also, now, like a pre-history of image networks – archaic, weird, strangely dream-like – their mobility frozen in time in an image-bank – or a suitcase, or a painting.

There is one set of images that Vriesendorp is particularly fond of – a section of a suitcase given over to postcards of cars on deserted beaches, with headlights glaring across the empty expanse of sand. Remember the image which hangs behind the bed in *Flagrant Délit*: the single beam manages to project outside the painting to mingle with the aureole of light that is Liberty's torch on the bedside table, one of several beams that function as gazes and ricochet around the apartment. Maybe one of the greatest pleasures of collecting is to find another of the same. Vriesendorp explains, in an irresistible coincidence, how she found another postcard of an amateur painting that had been copied from this self-same

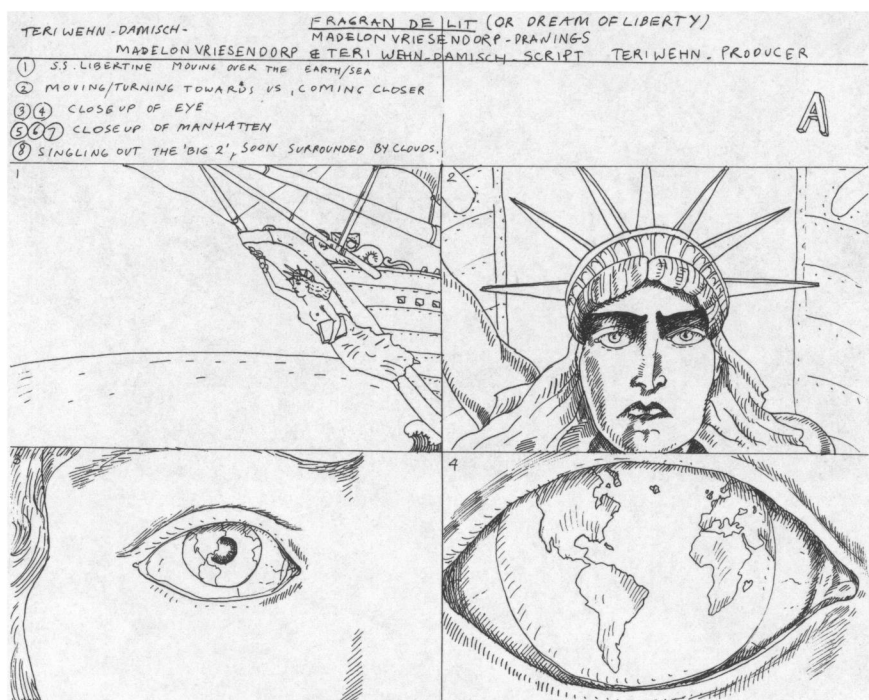
beach image – rather badly done with the sunset skewed out of vertical alignment with the horizon. It surely cannot be too difficult to get a sunset to fall straight, but this artist failed to do so and the image becomes precious as a consequence. She likes bad painting. She likes mistakes. When I systematically muddle the title of *Après l'Amour*, calling it *amour fou* in spite of myself, this appeals to her.

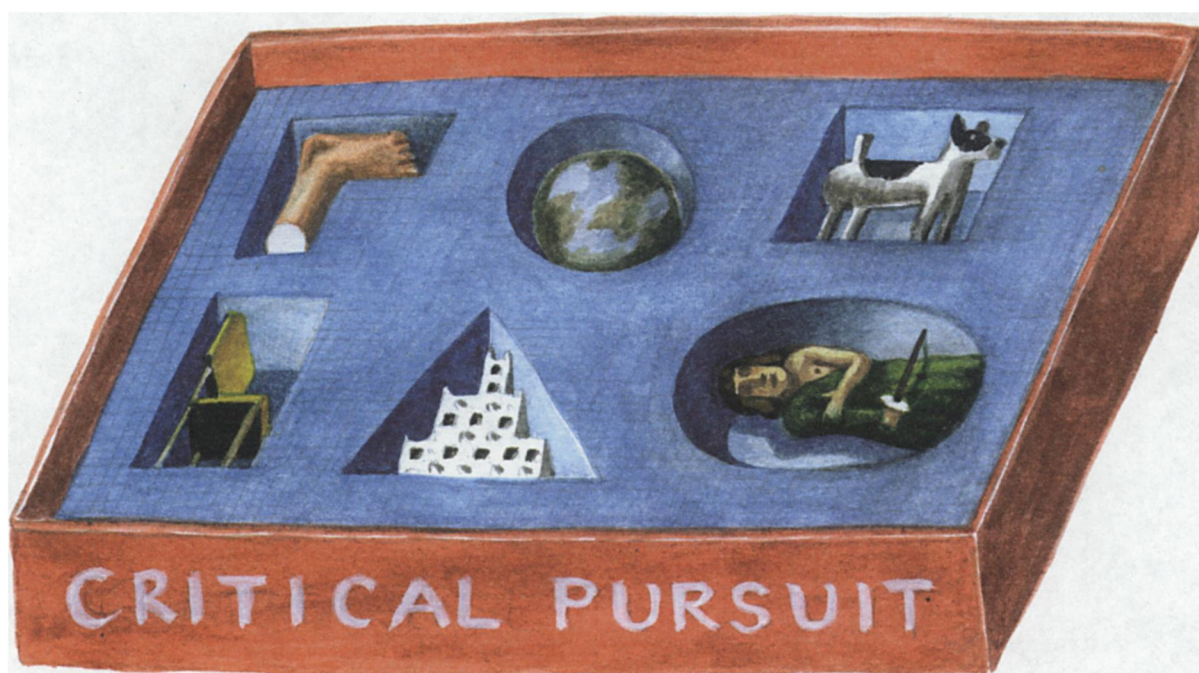
When an interview she did with Beatriz Colomina was transcribed for the catalogue of the exhibition at the AA, the phrase 'the woman is a torso' magically transmuted into 'the woman is a toaster' and she liked that even more. A torso meets a toaster. For Vriesendorp the jolt of the word-slip leapt to a length of African fabric in her studio, printed with a fabulously loud pattern of giant toasters. She will make it into something. What appears wrong ends up being right. The woman is a toaster; a building a body; a rock hysterical.

I had always assumed – wrongly as it turns out – that *Flagrant Délit*, the primal scene, must have come first. I should have known better, because of course the whole meaning of a primal scene is that it only manifests its 'firstness' in retrospect. Many of the paintings that show the city in meltdown – with the familiar protagonist-skyscrapers toppled and in ruins – were painted before it. These are mainly in the possession of Vriesendorp's friends, given as gifts, on their walls. Bringing them together again in this exhibition shows the full force of the work. The more of it you see, the stronger the sense of fragmentation of the narrative of disintegration. Any large collection of anything strains but ultimately fails to contain all its disparate parts. The diversity of the work she does – of the objects and images she collects, the paintings she makes, the mind-games she plays – is hard to contain for just that reason. Like the model of the postcard, small things exacerbate this sense of dispersal, not just by shrinking vast distances but by scrambling and short-circuiting time sequences too.



Madelon Vriesendorp's object archive, postcard collection and an early version of the Mind Game
Opposite: Maddie's mind-set and an animation sketch based on *Flagrant Délit* by Madelon Vriesendorp and Teri Wehn Damisch, 1979





Madelon Vriesendorp, *Mind Game* kit